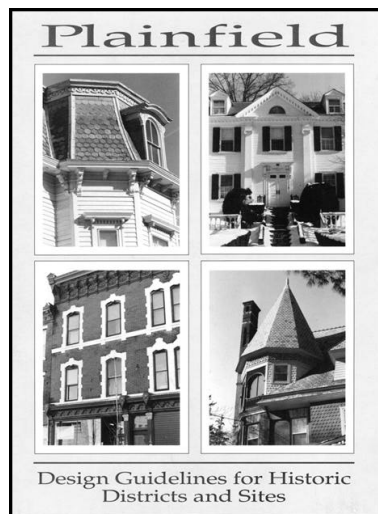




# DEVELOPING DESIGN GUIDELINES: AN INTRODUCTION

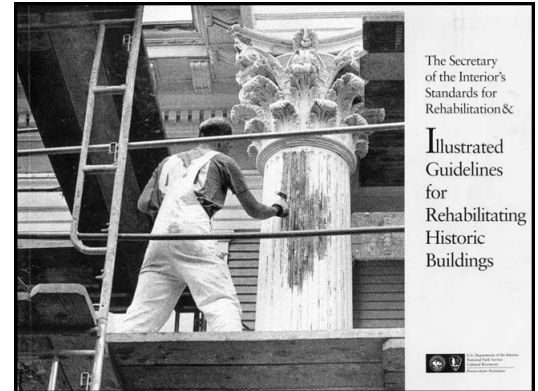
A strong set of design guidelines is one of the basic tools needed by a historic preservation commission in order to fulfill their intended mission. Design guidelines are a set of written and graphic standards that govern alterations or additions to designated historic structures and the construction of new buildings within historic districts. Design guidelines can help to preserve the character of an historic area, in addition to protecting property values, assisting architects and designers, and increasing public awareness about the essential characteristics of local historic architectural resources. Above all, design guide-

*This article originally appeared in the Historic Preservation Bulletin, January - April 1999 issue. It was prepared by Meredith Arms Bzdak, Ph.D., Director of Corporate Communications and Principal Architectural Historian for The RBA Group in Morristown. She serves on the Board of Directors of the NAPC.*



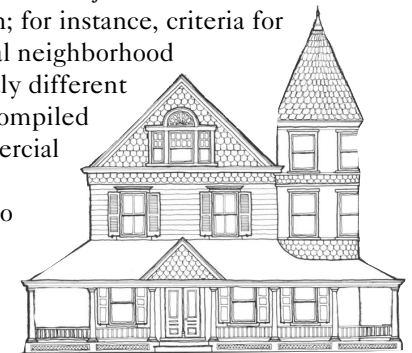
lines help a commission to ensure that the decisions they render are fair and reasonable and not subject to personal whim. When reviewing an application for a certificate of appropriateness, a commission renders a determination as to the application's approval, denial, or approval with conditions using the design guidelines as the basis for its decision.

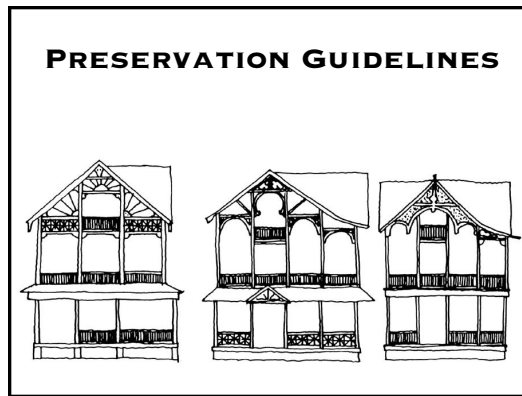
Design guidelines are usually included as one component of a historic preservation ordinance, but can also be issued separately as a stand-alone document for easy reference by architects and homeowners. The guidelines



basically include two components: first, a set of general standards that will be followed during the course of any type of review by the commission, and second, a more specific design criteria. In creating a set of general standards, many commissions choose to use the Secretary of the Interior Standards as a foundation. Including the Standards within your community's design guidelines is critical if your commission expects to review and assist in projects that will require further acceptance by the State Historic Preservation Office or the National Park Service. Such projects might include those where federal investment tax credits are sought or those funded through Community Development Block Grants.

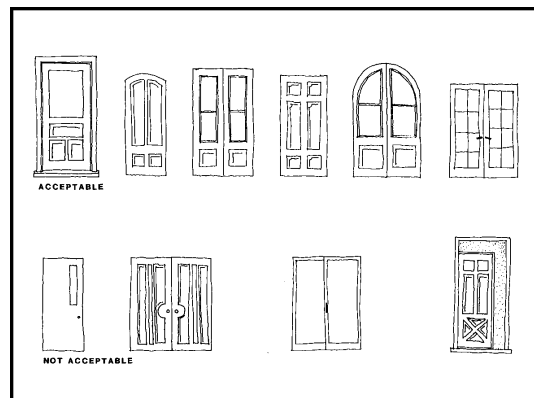
The specific design criteria that follow the general standards discuss in depth issues such as materials, rhythm of openings, rooflines, fences, etc. Design criteria may differ for each district under jurisdiction of the commission; for instance, criteria for a residential neighborhood will be vastly different from that compiled for a commercial center. It is important to remember, however, that above all, the





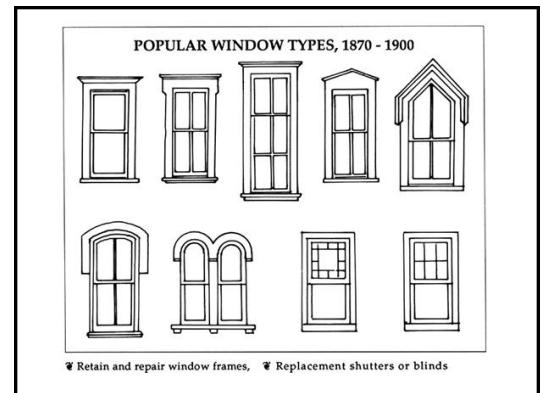
design guidelines (and particularly the design criteria) that a commission creates should be specific to their community and the district or region that they govern. For instance, guidelines should be consistent with other local regulations, such as zoning ordinances. And while it may be worthwhile to examine the guidelines that other communities have developed, they should never be copied directly. Guidelines should be customized to reflect the specific nature and character of the area for which they are written.

The preparation of design guidelines should be undertaken by a local commission once they have secured a strong foundation of civic support for their mission. Ideally, guidelines should be prepared by a subcommittee of the commission that can devote time to careful study of the historic area and its significant characteristics. Clear photographs depicting the various architectural styles present within a community and documenting details such as roofs, window openings, porches, and fences will be an invaluable tool in assembling design guideline. The entire process of study and evaluation is made easier with the assistance of professionals whose expertise lies in the careful analysis of visual details, such as an architect, architectural historian, or urban planner. Such professionals



may already exist as regular members of a commission. It is also a good idea to include a representative from each local district in the development of the design guidelines, as these people will be able to offer input into the goals of the district and serve as a liaison with owners and residents.

Text for the design guidelines is best written by a single author for reasons of uniformity and consistency; graphics (line drawings, diagrams, etc.) should likewise be the work of one person (computer programs may assist in giving the same impression). In order to be fully effective, design guidelines must be clear and readily comprehensible by both professionals and non-professionals alike. The typical homeowner must be able to understand them and should not be alienated by overly technical language. For this reason, graphic representation of the concepts that are presented is essential, and writing should be kept simple and straightforward.



While restoration and rehabilitation within historic districts is often challenging, it is the issue of new construction that often proves most difficult for commissions, and this is the primary reason for making a set of design criteria as specific to the community's resources as possible. Although many commissions still prefer to see new buildings designed with an "historic" appearance, there is a general trend away from this type of directive. Instead, some commissions are looking to see that new construction is consistent with the existing architectural context. In this scenario, issues of style remain flexible, yet buildings must still exhibit a certain degree of respect for the environment in which they are placed: massing, scale, setbacks, and details like roof shapes, rhythm of openings, and consistency of material become more important than the direct imitation of an historical style.

Once design guidelines are in place, all commission members should become familiar with them and have them readily available at all meetings. When rendering a decision regarding a certificate of appropriateness, the guidelines and criteria that have informed the decision should be referenced specifically and recorded in the meeting's minutes.

Periodically, guidelines should be reviewed to ensure that they continue to reflect the essential character of the historic area being protected, particularly where a change in the use of structures (i.e. from residential to commercial) has occurred over time.

Sample design guidelines prepared by a variety of New Jersey commissions, as well as National Trust Information Sheets on the topic are available by calling George Chidley at the New Jersey Historic Preservation Office at (609) 984-6017. The National Alliance of Preservation Commissions (NAPC) also provides technical assistance to local commissions on issues such as this; they can be reached at P.O. Box 1605, Athens GA 30603 or by telephone at (706) 542-4705. Preservation New Jersey's Preserving New Jersey: A Handbook for Historic Preservation (Nancy L. Zerbe, ed., 1995) includes very clear, readable information on the process of preparing design guidelines and places them within the larger context of historic preservation in New Jersey.



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